

Rev. Phillips Brooks

More than a Christmas Carol

Article by Mary Katherine May



Phillips Brooks, is known today mostly for his authorship of the favorite Christmas hymn, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. During his lifetime he was known for his powerful sermons and friendly relationship with those whom he served.

The Brooks family tree leads back to the Puritans who came to America for religious freedom. Though their roots were Christian, the story of their history shows that many on both Phillips' mother and father's family rejected their faith for Unitarian leanings. It was by the influence of Phillips' mother, Mary Ann Phillips Brooks, who decided it was time for a change that the Brooks family began to attend the Episcopal Church in Boston. Here they were nurtured by a loving pastor, Dr. Vinton, and within a few years the father of this large family, William Gray Brooks, accepted the Christian faith as his own by rite of Confirmation.

Phillips Brooks entered Harvard College right before his sixteenth birthday, where he excelled in the classics. In a paper he contributed to the *Harvard Monthly* titled "*The English Table Talkers*" in 1854, Brooks stated, "*Men like to be talked to rather than preached at; they prefer the easy chair to the pulpit*". It was a rather prophetic statement, as it is this type of philosophy that would follow him into the role he was called by God to fill, that of a pastor.

Following graduation, Brooks took a position teaching at the Boston Latin School where he had attended before Harvard. Just nineteen, he was transferred from a class of younger boys to teach a class that included young men no more than a year or two his junior. He failed at discipline, and left his post.

What followed was a complete sense of failure and soul searching. Encouraged by his pastor, Dr. Vinton, young Mr. Brooks traveled away from home for the first time in his life to seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. It was pre-Civil War, and his conviction that slavery is wrong was not popular. Among his fellow students he was known as a modest, quiet and reserved man who expressed himself eloquently through words.

Home during a summer break, on Sunday, July 12, 1857, Phillips Brooks "ratified his baptismal vows" through the rite of Confirmation at the age of 21. In his mother's recorded thoughts of this event, she wrote "*I will thank God forever that He has answered my lifelong prayers in making him a Christian and His servant in the ministry.*"

It was tumultuous times in the United States. Anger over control and power of rights was escalating. There was also great economic instability that became known as "the panic of 1857." From this time of depression, however, with hurting people everywhere, a Christian revival arose that rivaled the Great Awakening of the previous century.

Correspondence was regular and frequent between Alexandria and Boston, with his mother addressing her son, barely yet a man, as "my dear Philly." Each year in seminary brought spiritual growth to the soul and mind of Phillips. It was early in his first year that he noticed the depth of faith of his fellow students in comparison to his own, and though not clearly stated, I believe it is this comparison that fired a longing in him for the same. At the time of his graduation in 1859, his previous classical education had blended with a maturing faith, and he accepted his first position as a pastor.

Brooks first pastoral call was to Church of the Advent in Philadelphia, and soon after church attendance was growing. His preaching—not usually done in formal clergy attire but only a simple, black robe, often presented next to the pulpit or from the chancel steps, left no doubt about his passion for Jesus Christ. It is in this fashion that we see the wisdom in his previous words, *Men like to be talked to rather than preached at; they prefer the easy chair to the pulpit*.

In 1865, now serving his second church and following the death of President Lincoln, Brooks set out for England and a year abroad. Through letters to his family he related all that he saw, but it was in the Middle East that he

added Scripture. The impact of being where Jesus lived led him to write, *"Christ is not merely the greatest, but the only presence that fills the landscape in Palestine ..."*

Phillips Brooks rode into Bethlehem on horseback Christmas 1865. From this experience came our beloved carol that has stood the test of time, **O Little Town of Bethlehem.**

The Rev. Brooks would become a bishop of the Episcopal Church and head of the new theological seminary at Cambridge, Massachusetts, yet his heart's desire was always and only to be a parish priest. *"Some men's faith only makes itself visible,"* he wrote, *"other men's lightens everything within its reach."*

For his Sunday school at Holy Trinity, Christmas time 1868, Brooks penned his famous Christmas carol, to which was added the music written by organist Lewis Redner of same church. There is a stanza not included in our hymnals and songbooks that was present in the first program.

Where children pure and happy
Pray to the blessed Child,
Where misery cries out to thee,
Son of the mother mild;
Where Charity stands watching,
And Faith holds wide the door,
The dark night wakes, the glory breaks,
And Christmas comes once more.

In the chill of winter, January 1893, what began as a cold led to the death of Phillips Brooks. On January 26, activity in the city of Boston virtually ceased as Brooks' casket was carried on the shoulders of Harvard students to Trinity Church, where thousands came to pay their respects. Following the service where the hymns Jesus, Lover of My Soul and For All the Saints were sung, another service was held outside for the crowd that filled Copley Square.

Many sermons were given to honor this man's humility and service, yet he had not been one to speak of his accomplishments, but rather one who acted upon God's Living Word. He was a big man, standing over six feet tall and weighing 300 hundred pounds, but the size of his character was greater than his girth.

"Some men's faith only makes itself visible, other men's lightens everything within its reach." Brooks would never have claimed his statement for himself, yet his whole life was dedicated to being that light.

How good it is that the divine light shines on many mirrors and completes its revelation in no single soul! ... P. Brooks

Sources

Phillips Brooks, 1835-1893; memories of his life with extracts from his letters and note-books by Alexander Allen, published by Dutton, New York 1907.

Jewels from Phillips Brooks, Berger Publishing Company, Buffalo NY, 1907.